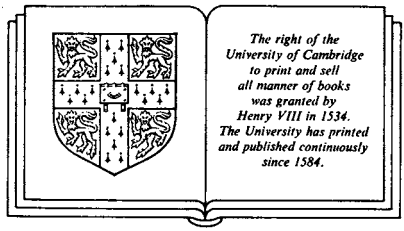
Community, Trade, and Networks

Southern Fujian Province from the Third to the Thirteenth Century

Hugh R. Clark



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The problem

The history of China is, of course, long and infinitely complex. The embracing term "China" itself masks much of the complexity, for it too easily suggests some monolithic and uniform whole. How easy it is to forget that the geographic entity we call China is comparable not only in size but also in regional diversity to the entity at the other end of the Eurasian land mass that we call Europe. And surely no one would argue that European history, despite its general origins in the Greco-Roman tradition, is monolithic. It is, in fact, a fascinating twist of history that China evolved largely as a political whole while Europe has been fractured through most of its evolution. Both land masses had ample opportunity to develop in either direction.

Yet because of this twist, Chinese history has too often been approached as if it really were monolithic. Western students of China's past have only recently begun to apply to their tasks the methods of regional and local history that became so important in European and American historiography earlier in this century. As a result, stereotypical images based on broad generalizations have evolved to describe China at any point in its history. The era of the Han dynasty is thought of as an agrarian period of great autarkic latifundia and little economic integration; the Tang is characterized by the rise of rural marketing networks and an increasingly sophisticated economy; the Song is identified with its great technology and highly developed commercialization.[1] To be fair to our historical tradition, these are legitimate gross generalizations. But so is it legitimate on a similar scale to state that the period from the twelfth to the fourteenth century witnessed the rebirth of town life in Europe. Yet despite that "rebirth," most of Europe and most Europeans were largely unaffected, continuing an unaltered existence under the older feudal patterns.

The problem with such generalizations, necessary though they sometimes may be as heuristic devices, is that they mask the regional and local diversity that gives a society its character. Generalizations, to the degree that they are legitimate, are only the sum of that diversity; to the people and society of the time, however, the regional or local character was of far greater importance than the whole. It is true, as noted, that some areas of Europe – especially Italy and the Germanic coastal regions – experienced an urban revival in the twelfth to the fourteenth century. But it is also a fact that most of the rest of Europe was essentially unaffected, or even saw very different patterns of economic evolution.[2] In the same way, it is true that Han China was generally characterized by vast, self-sufficient latifundia with few if any ties to the outside. Yet at the same time the empire supported probably the largest urban population of the contemporary world, including cities of several hundred thousand or even 1 million people. Such urban concentrations had to have commercial interaction with the hinterland both for their own food supply and for the economic and demographic viability of their population.[3] And immediately we find two large elements of the population that did not fit the heuristically useful stereotype: the urban population, which included the very rich but also mercantile and artisan groups as well as the undefined urban masses that populated all pre-modern cities; and a rural population that did not live on the autarkic latifundia but whose livelihood depended on interaction with that same urban population. In short, not all regions of the Han Empire fit the stereotype of autarkic economic units despite its general validity. The same is true of all generalizations; indeed, the word itself seems to say as much.

Unfortunately, for this very reason generalizations can hide the truth; patterns and structures at the local level may in fact differ radically from the generally accepted model, even to the point where the model itself may have to be amended or even rejected. Ultimately, the truth of a picture of China at any given time depends on the study of China's many regions and localities, just as in the case of Europe. We must be careful not to reverse the mistake of generalization; what we find in a given local study ought not be too quickly extrapolated to explain the whole. Both approaches have value, but the validity of either can be fully demonstrated only when both have been independently and fully pursued.

The study

What follows is a history of a defined economic microregion – the area of southern Fujian Province known today as Minnan and to an earlier era as Quannan – as it evolved from its earliest settlement by Chinese immi-

grants, probably near the close of the Latter Han dynasty, through a complete cycle of economic and demographic growth, culminating late in the Southern Song dynasty. In the millennium demarcated by those limits, and especially in the latter four centuries bridging the later Tang dynasty and the Song, the region underwent a complete transformation from a land beyond the fringes of the empire, inhabited exclusively by aboriginal tribal peoples, into one of the most prominent centers of the empire. This study focuses specifically on the economic dimensions of that transformation; I anticipate exploring the social ramifications in later work.

As will become clear, the key to the economic transformation was the emergence of the core city of Quanzhou as a key port in the importation of goods from the lands of the Indian Ocean, or "South Seas," and the subsequent distribution of those imported goods throughout the empire; I refer to this pattern of exchange as the "transshipment trade."[4] Today, and indeed in recent centuries, Quanzhou has not been prominent among China's great urban centers; it has, in fact, even fallen to secondary status among the cities of southern Fujian, having been supplanted by Xiamen as the major center of trade and population. But for a period in the early centuries of the second millennium A.D. the city was among the most prominent in the entire empire. It displaced Guangzhou (Canton) as the empire's largest port. Its overseas trade connections ranged from Japan and Korea in the north, to the Philippines and Indonesia to the east and south, and as far west as the Arabian Peninsula and even the coast of Africa. Marco Polo, writing at the close of the thirteenth century when decline had already set in, suggested it might be the greatest port in all the world.[5] The domestic distribution of its imports led to similarly extensive trade connections with all the major centers within the empire.

As I shall explain, the transshipment trade created a distinct economic environment for Quanzhou City and its hinterland. Because of the trade and the great wealth that it generated, the city developed an economic base that was not solely dependent on the well-being of the hinterland; goods entered from afar and were in turn transshipped to distant centers. As this trade begot a heretofore unknown prosperity in the urban center, the city became a magnet to the thousands of migrants fleeing from the incessant turmoil of north China; by the twelfth century the urban population easily exceeded 100,000 persons and may well have been as large as 200,000 to 300,000. At the same time, the hinterland experienced its own surge in population between the ninth and twelfth centuries, ultimately creating a crisis in both the availability of land and the food supply. In response to the first, efforts were made to bring ever more marginal land into production. But the crisis in the food supply was to be

the more determining. As early as the eleventh century we find evidence that the hinterland was no longer reliably able to feed both itself and the city; in emergencies the region had to turn elsewhere for grain. By the later twelfth century, dependence on imported grain had been built into local productive patterns; annually as much as 50 percent of the grain was imported from outside the region.

Such a situation was possible, I shall argue, because of the transshipment trade. As the local ability to meet the demand for grain became increasingly problematic, the trade networks provided an established mechanism for importing supplemental grain supplies. By ensuring food supplies and thus freeing the local peasantry from the burden of producing food crops, the trade allowed them to turn to alternative crops such as fruits and fibers, or even to give up crop production altogether in favor of making crafts such as pottery or metalworking. Just as the long-distance trade networks provided a mechanism for importing grain, so they also provided a mechanism for distributing local products both among the cities of the empire and even along the length of the Asian littoral. The local peasantry was consequently not dependent on the consumptive desires or abilities of the people of Quanzhou.[6]

The context

Before turning to the study itself, it is necessary to place it in the context of contemporary work. As I have explained, not until recently have historians in the West begun to apply the methods of local, and perhaps even more often "regional," history to China's past.[7] There have been two related reasons for this. First, Western methods of history were not generally applied to the study of China until the decades following World War I when the early giants of Japanese sinology such as Naitō Konan, Kato Shigeshi, and Kuwabara Jitsuzō began to use them. Initial efforts concentrated on exploring the basic institutional, social, and economic outlines of Chinese history, the skeletal framework on which almost all later research has depended. Such work was almost always based on standard sources such as the dynastic histories or the statutory collections called *huiyao*, compiled by and from the perspective of the imperial government, and this led to the second reason historians did not pursue local history. The sources of local history include local gazetteers, inscriptional collections, genealogies, and the collected works of individuals. All but the collected works were of little use to the initial studies, and even they were not widely used. These sources were consequently neither well understood nor extensively explored. Western historians were slow to understand the

importance of the local perspective in the work they were doing, or even to realize that Chinese local history was possible to document.

The trend toward applying Western methods to local history was again initiated by Japanese scholars. Hibino Takeo's pioneering study of Fujian in the Tang and Song and Kitayama Yakeo's response, both published on the eve of World War II, stand as notable examples, but Fujii Hiroshi's excellent study of the merchants of Huizhou (Anhui), published in the early 1950s, is perhaps the most often cited.[8] Western examples begin most notably with Frederic Wakeman's 1967 *Strangers at the Gate*, described by one admirer as "a study which virtually single-handedly put local history back in the American modern China curriculum."[9] Following Wakeman's work, a number of monographs appeared dealing with the late imperial era.[10]

These studies were important pioneering efforts because they demonstrated the unique perspective that local history provides and also because they refined our understanding of the functions and structures of the late traditional Chinese state, economy, and society as it had developed from the single perspective of the center. The study of local history sometimes requires that generally accepted paradigms be revised. Wakeman's work, for example, was integral in recasting our concept of the Opium War and its effect on local Chinese society, demonstrating how it galvanized the local elite community of the Pearl River delta into organizing itself, independently of imperial oversight, against an external threat. Wakeman's use of the unexplored perspectives of local and regional history, combined with Philip Kuhn's subsequent study of similar elite-led defense groups in nineteenth-century Hunan,[11] revolutionized our concept of late traditional society and the role that local elites played in the final decades of the imperial era. Fujii's work, likewise, through its detailed vision of the roles and functions of the merchants in Huizhou, demonstrated the intensely commercial nature of the economy in the late traditional era, thereby contradicting widely held notions about its supposed precommercial nature. Such work, at the same time that it revised and refined our image of the Chinese experience, shattered the myth that it was not possible to pursue China's local history. However, these scholars pushed back the frontier of local history only into what is known as the "late traditional" era, beginning in the sixteenth century and lasting through the early twentieth.

It was not until the late 1970s that Western scholars attempted to use the methods of local history to produce monographic studies of earlier eras; indeed, the earliest books were not published until the mid-1980s, when Robert Hymes's seminal study on the elite of Fuzhou (Jiangxi)

appeared. Hymes's work was followed shortly by Richard von Glahn's study of Chinese expansion along the Sichuan frontier.[12] Again, Western efforts were preceded by the work of Japanese scholars, notably including the several studies by Shiba Yoshinobu of the Yangtze River delta and Ningpo.[13] The present work falls into the emerging study of China's local history during the "middle period," ranging from the eighth to the fifteenth century. In common with the earlier studies by Hymes and von Glahn, it demonstrates the feasibility of such efforts; we can apply the modern Western methods of local history to the Song dynasty.

If the feasibility of middle-period local history were all this study established, it might be of some interest, but it would be of little importance. I would argue, however, that it demonstrates something far more important about China's historical development. In the manner that always makes local history so potentially important, it provides a perspective on the nature of the Chinese economy during the middle period which supplements that derived from earlier empire-wide studies, notably including Shiba Yoshinobu's monumental and path-breaking study of commerce in the Song and Liang Gengyao's equally important work on the rural economy of the Southern Song.[14] It thereby casts some doubt on a standard assumption of recent historical work.

Historians have commonly identified two broad "commercial revolutions" in China's past: that of the late Tang and Song, the period with which the present study deals; and that of the late Ming and Qing. In a recent statement summarizing the current state of knowledge about the two, William T. Rowe has asserted that the fundamental contrast was one of "routinization":

> The progress from the first to the second commercial revolutions may have been less one of kind than of degree. . . . Inter-regional trade even in staples had existed in the Song, if only on an *ad hoc* basis, to make up temporary or accidental shortfalls. What the subsequent revolution introduced . . . was not bulk inter-regional trade itself but rather its routinization.[15]

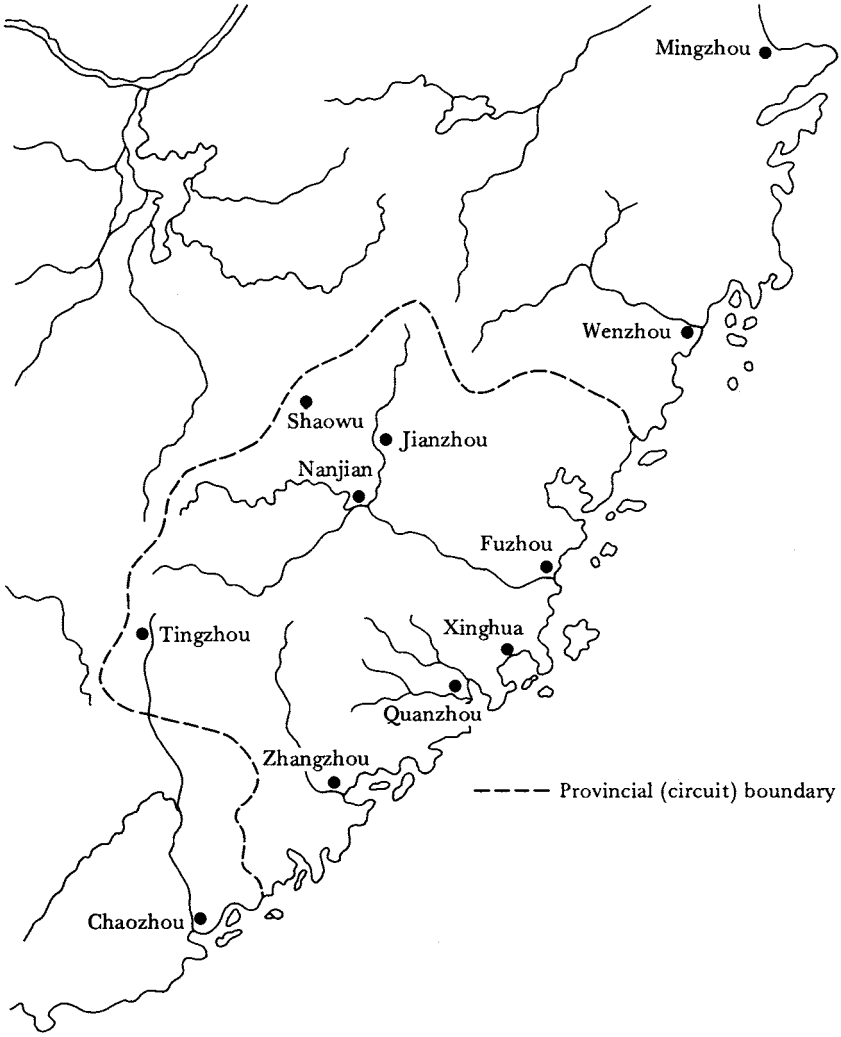
In short, Rowe has argued, it was the regular and routinized involvement of all segments of the population in the commercial net that distinguished the later period from the Tang and Song. As I indicated in my summary of the present study, however, it was just such routinization of commercialization that marked the economy of Quannan in the middle period. While it would ignore my own injunction, stated earlier, against moving too rapidly from local history to broad generalization were I to state that Rowe's paradigm is faulty, the present study, combined with the broader work of Shiba, Liang, and others, should give some pause in the future.

The land and its early history

Quanzhou City is situated on a bay of the same name on China's southeast coast. It lies directly opposite the island of Taiwan, for which it was a major source of Chinese settlers in later centuries. The city is tied to its hinterland via the Jin River drainage network as well as by its ready access to adjacent coastal centers. In the Tang and Song dynasties – the era with which this study is most concerned – it was the political center of a prefecture also called Quanzhou. The boundaries of the prefecture underwent several changes in the Tang and early Song but ultimately, after 984, included seven districts (*xian*): Huian, Jinjiang – which included the prefectural city itself – and Tongan running north to south along the coast; Nan'an, Anxi, and Yongchun along the middle and upper reaches of the Jin; and Dehua on the uppermost reaches of the Min River drainage system flowing to the north. North of the prefecture lay Xinghua Commandery, actually part of Quanzhou Prefecture until 984. Xinghua embraced three districts: Putian on the coast, and Xianyou and Xinghua in the interior along the Mulan River. To the south lay Zhangzhou Prefecture, including four districts: Longxi at the mouth of the Jiulong River, Zhangpu to the south along the coast, and Zhangtai and Longyan on the middle and upper reaches of the Jiulong (see Maps 1 through 4).

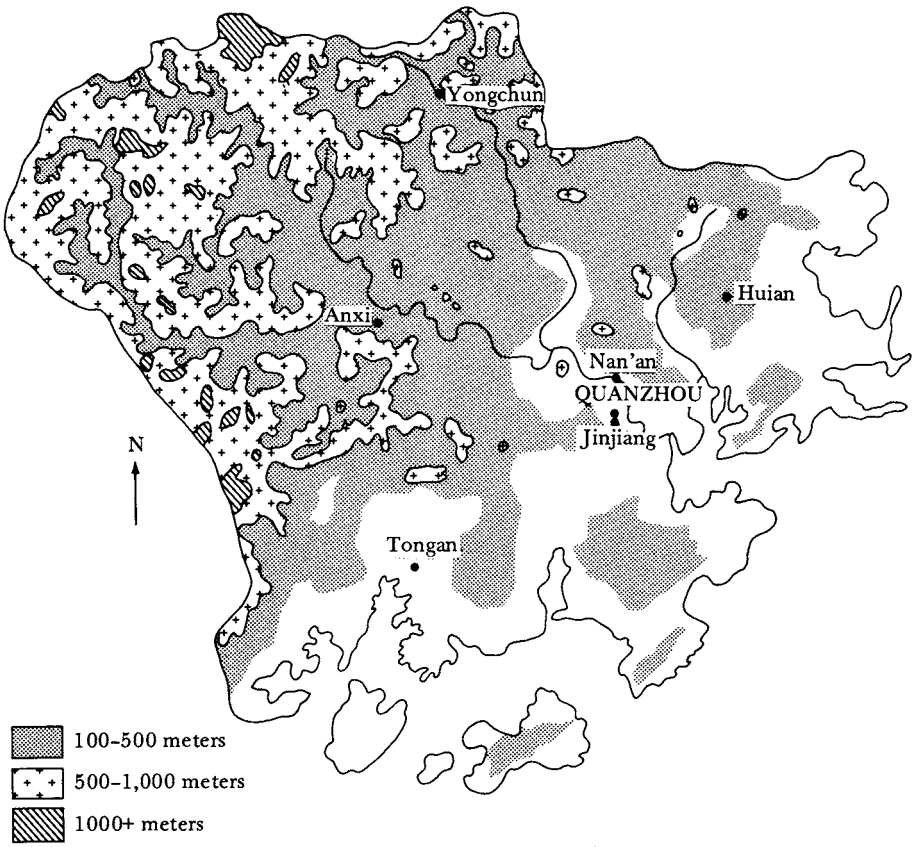
Together these districts made up the area on which the present study focuses. But they can be subdivided between (1) a core region, which maintained an integral and inseparable relationship with Quanzhou City; and (2) two peripheral regions, which, by virtue of distance from the city and their ability to forge independent trade relationships, maintained a degree of independence and separation. The core included the Jin River drainage system, a network that penetrates seventy to eighty kilometers into the interior, and the adjacent coastal districts – in short, Quanzhou Prefecture.[16] The Jiulong River network focusing on Zhangzhou, by contrast, was never fully subordinate to the Quanzhou core. The mouth of the Jiulong provides a port comparable to Quanzhou Bay – in fact, in recent centuries it has supplanted that bay as the central port of the region. This allowed Zhangzhou to maintain separate trade relationships with distant ports, both domestic and foreign, and thereby to uphold a separate identity. Xinghua Commandery was similarly able to maintain some separation because of its easy access to the north to the adjacent markets and port of Fuzhou, the political center of Fujian through almost all its history and always an economic rival of Quanzhou.

In addition to dividing the focal region between a core and periphery, we can divide it into two distinct topographical zones: a coastal (or lowland) zone and an interior (or highland) zone. The dominant feature



Map 1. Fujian Province

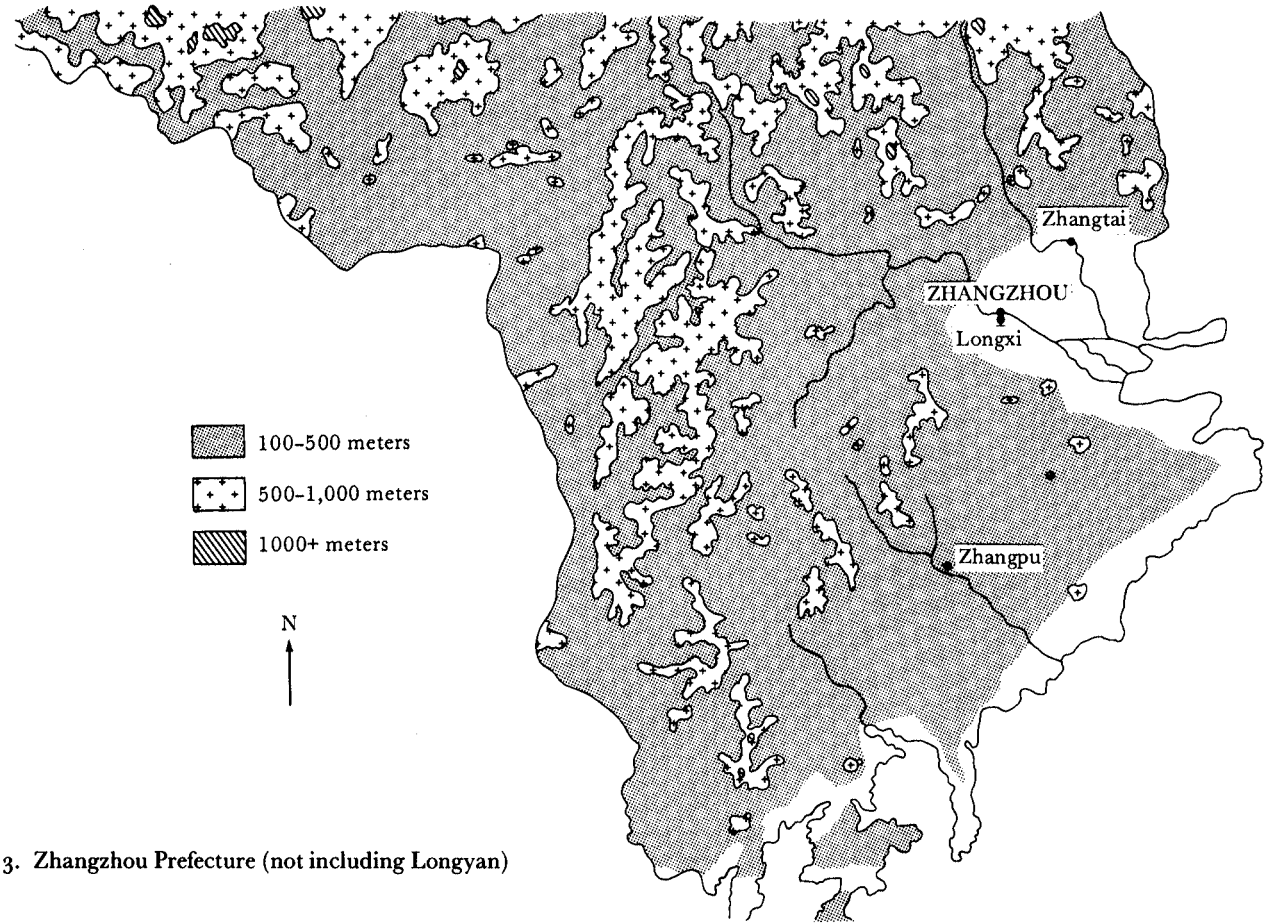
of the region is the mountains of the interior. These are geologically among the oldest mountains in East Asia; consequently, they are weathered and no longer very high.[17] Yet they cover nearly all the hinterland's land mass and are generally too steep for convenient farming. The lowlands, by contrast, are almost entirely restricted to the narrow coastal plain, a stretch of land never more than a few kilometers deep. Even where the



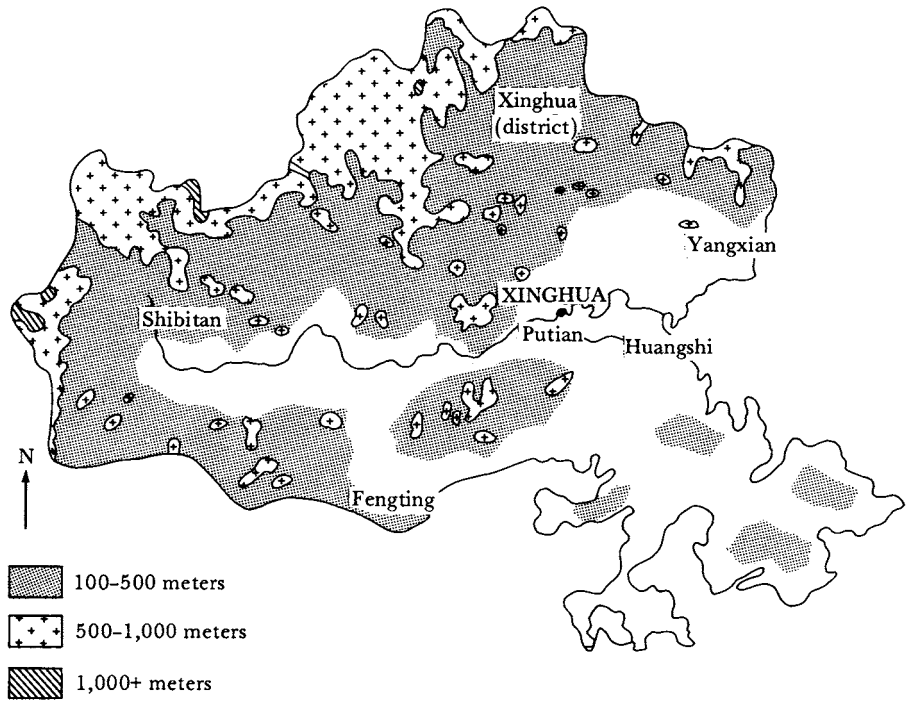
Map 2. Quanzhou Prefecture

several rivers that define the topography of Fujian – the Min, Mulan, Jin, and Jiulong – cut into the mountains, their valleys are generally narrow and add little to the extent of the flat lowlands. Yet as twentieth-century accounts have emphasized, arable soil is basically confined to these lowlands. Indeed, one recent survey claimed that only 8 percent of all Fujian – including those mountain slopes opened over the centuries by terracing – could be cultivated.[18]

Today the population of Fujian is concentrated in the narrow bands of low country. But that is not where Chinese settlement most likely began. In fact, if we try to re-create what the original settlers found as they worked their way into southern Fujian, we can imagine a very different environment. There is no recorded history of Quannan before the late



Map 3. Zhangzhou Prefecture (not including Longyan)



Map 4. Xinghua Prefecture

second or third century A.D. Generally it is assumed that southern Fujian was controlled by the MinYue kingdom, one of several tribal kingdoms of the Yue people that began to have contact with the expanding Chinese world late in the Warring States period. But this kingdom was centered to the north, straddling the modern border of Fujian and Zhejiang provinces.[19] What authority it exercised in Quannan is unclear, but it was probably not great. Further, during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty (140–87 B.C.), the ruling elite of the kingdom rebelled against their Han overlords; the rebellion was, not surprisingly, crushed. As a reprisal, the *Shiji* records, the emperor ordered the people of MinYue forcibly relocated to the assimilated territory to the north between the Yangtze and Huai rivers, and the land of MinYue "was left vacant."[20] No doubt, to the extent that this order was carried out, it was directed against the semisinified elite that had apparently led the rebellion; the land was not left truly "vacant." Instead, all of Fujian reverted to – if it had in fact ever advanced beyond – a decentralized and culturally unsophisticated